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SUBJECT: FIRST AUSTRALIAN HOSTAGE IN IRAQ WILL NOT ALTER  
GOA POLICY

1. (U) SUMMARY: The GOA responded strongly to the first kidnapping of an Australian citizen in Iraq by decrying the actions of the insurgents who seized him, rejecting their demands for a withdrawal of Australian troops, and affirming that Australia's commitment to Iraq would not waiver. Short of giving in to the hostage-takers, the GOA has pledged to do all it can to assist its citizen, Douglas Wood, and has sent an emergency task force to Iraq to work with Iraqi and Coalition authorities to try to obtain the Australian's release. The GOA has also asked the UN for assistance. End Summary.

2. (U) Australian leaders said publicly on May 2 and 3 that the GOA would do everything within its power to help 63-year-old Australian citizen/American resident Douglas Wood, the first Australian to be kidnapped in Iraq. Both Prime Minister Howard and Foreign Minister Downer made clear, however, that Australia would not accede to the terrorists' demands that Australia pull its troops out of Iraq. In a video released on May 2 by his captors, Wood pleaded with President Bush and Prime Minister John Howard to withdraw troops in order to save his life. The "Shura Council of the Mujahedden of Iraq" claimed responsibility for the kidnapping and released a statement with the video tape saying its actions were timed to coincide with Australian Defense Minister Robert Hill's weekend visit to Iraq. Australian press also speculated that the kidnapping was related to the recent deployment of 450 additional Australian troops to southern Iraq. According to media reports, Wood, an engineer who has been a California resident since 1992, was working on construction projects in Iraq when he was seized. His American-citizen wife Pearl identified him in the videotape.

3. (U) Prime Minister Howard told the press that it has been his "great dread" that an Australian would be taken hostage at some point. The PM announced that a special interagency task force headed by Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Deputy Secretary Nick Warner, and including Australian Federal Police and Defense Department personnel, would arrive in Iraq on May 3 to liaise with Iraqi and Coalition authorities. Howard said his government would do everything it could to secure Wood's safe release, consistent with the GOA's position of not giving in to hostage takers. "We won't alter (our) position: we can't have the foreign policy of this country dictated by terrorists," the PM declared.

4. (U) Foreign Minister Alexander Downer reiterated Howard's position and reinforced that Australia would not pay a ransom or change its policy in response to kidnappings. "We are not sub-contracting our foreign policy to terrorists," Downer said. He believed to do so would only encourage terrorists and kidnappers around the world to take more Australians hostage. "It's going to be very important, not just for Iraqis but for the world, that we stick with the Iraqis and help them promote their democracy, help Iraq become a free country, and to pull out now would be the worst thing imaginable." Downer said the GOA response team would consider speaking with the hostage takers to persuade them to "desist from an utterly cruel, callous and inhumane" act. Defense Minister Hill, meanwhile, attempted to manage expectations, commenting on a radio program that he was not confident the efforts to free Wood would be successful.

5. (U) Australian media also reported FM Downer's request to Secretary General Annan for the UN's help. The Secretary

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General reportedly sent instructions to UN officials in Iraq to provide all possible assistance to the Australians. The GOA is also hoping that tribal and religious leaders in Iraq will play a role in facilitating Wood's release, as they have in previous hostage situations.

6. (SBU) DFAT Iraq Task Force Director Bassim Blazey told Polcouns that FM Downer was planning an interview with al-Jazeera on May 3 while in Washington to appeal for Wood's release. Australian Ambassador to Iraq Harold Brown was cutting short his vacation and returning to Iraq to assist with the situation. Blazey said the GOA was in contact with Wood's family in California and that so far they appeared to be reacting to the situation as calmly as possible, agreeing with the GOA policy of not paying ransom to hostage-takers. Finally, Blazey expressed appreciation for the "excellent" cooperation the Australians were receiving on the ground in

Baghdad from the U.S.

17. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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